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Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development and the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly: priority theme: Addressing inequalities and challenges to social inclusion through fiscal, wage and social protection policies

Statement submitted by Baha'i International Community, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.

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Statement

Billions Arising:
Releasing the Universal Capacity for Transformative Social Change

Thoughtful actors the world over are striving to construct social and economic arrangements that reflect the reality that "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights." In this light, the fiscal, wage, and social protection measures being considered by the Commission for Social Development can be understood as incremental means of fostering vibrant communities in which members from all backgrounds are both contributing to and benefitting from the common good. The current global order often encourages self-interest at the expense of the general welfare, venerates extreme accumulations of wealth, and pursues economic gain without regard for the natural environment. At the heart of the work of the Commission, therefore, is the search for means by which governments can bend economic forces toward the straight path of justice and opportunity, regardless of any person's place of birth or social circumstances.

To recognize the dignity of some seven billion individuals is to acknowledge a human reality that is truly universal. At the level of principle, there is widespread agreement that humanity constitutes a single people, albeit infinitely diverse in language, history, and cultural expression. Consciousness of this oneness of humankind is, in many ways, the beating heart of the United Nations system itself. Yet social upheaval based in assumptions of difference is apparent on all sides. Arrangements that were designed to support an increasingly interdependent world are being questioned and, in some cases, abandoned altogether. Unforgiving conceptions of otherness are sweeping populations across the globe and fracturing societies. Social consensus around basic norms is breaking down by the day, as much between coworkers and neighbors as nations and economic blocs.

A vision of the future that unites growing numbers into common cause will be key to addressing structural challenges such as these. Equally important will be the ability to translate that vision into practical realities. Economic arrangements that reduce extremes of wealth and poverty and foster social cohesion will be critical in this regard. At one level, the economic policies under consideration at the Commission have the potential to define a minimum standard below which no individual should be allowed to fall. Such standards seek to ensure that misfortune does not translate into humiliation and setbacks do not compound into calamity. But such policies can also help establish an environment in which capacity is built, in ever-increasing numbers, to contribute to the construction of a better world.

The role of institutions of governance

How might Member States use policy tools to bring about conditions worthy of the highest aspirations of their people? In practice, measures designed to foster social development often assume elements of the donor/recipient relationship, with their attendant pitfalls of paternalism and superiority, from one perspective, and dependency and disempowerment, from another. If these are to be avoided, new patterns of relationship will be needed between local communities, individual citizens, and social institutions. Such systems of relationships would both foster and draw from the widespread involvement of a population in thoughtful consultation on their shared future and meaningful decision-making on ways that it might be brought about. In villages and cities, neighborhoods and in the home, the process thus set in motion would seek to draw on the talents and perspectives of the fullest range of the human family. The role of government would come to focus on enabling and empowering, rather than simply providing and funding. And helping to unlock the

transformative power of local communities and individuals would become a defining objective for agencies at all levels.

At stake in this perspective is not just a set of policies, but rather an ongoing process concerned with expanding the bounds of agency and prosperity, both collective and individual.

The building of capacity in local communities, on the one hand, and the government's discharge of its rightful duties, on the other, can sometimes be placed in opposition to one another. But this duality ultimately proves false, for some of the most notable instances of rapid progress have sprung from the convergence of enlightened policy and empowered populations. Communities flourish as they develop the capacities - intellectual, social, technical, and moral - to make informed decisions about how their agency will be exercised in ways that both contribute to and are enhanced by state services. For its part, the government's objective of broad-based social advancement is best served when local populations have the capability and volition to resolve problems on their own. In this light, social and economic policies become vital means for the state to enhance the partnership between itself and the communities it supports and serves.

What this looks like in practice will vary considerably by context. But many insights will be universal, and the UN is uniquely positioned to facilitate processes of learning at the global level. Means at its disposal include convening spaces devoted to genuine exploration, aggregating experience, and identifying emerging trends and patterns - all free from self-congratulation and promotion. It is well-suited, for example, to help deepen understanding of the process of effective policy-making, rather than the mere search for existing policies to be imitated. Over time, efforts in this direction could provide invaluable insight into the means by which effective policies are generated and implemented - the types of decision-making used to build ownership and commitment, for example, or the types of interaction used to foster close collaboration between actors at different levels.

The UN also has a vital role to play in advancing key areas of learning. How, for example, can the stigma sometimes faced by individuals who rely on social protection programs be reduced? Similarly, under what conditions do various fiscal, wage, and social protection policies contribute to truly cohesive and inclusive societies, versus simply feeding into a collection of well-served but disconnected subpopulations?

Billions of protagonists

Few would disagree that the present moment is one of significant disruption. But the discerning eye can see signs of integration as well as disintegration in the changes accelerating on every side. This suggests a worldwide process of transition and transformation rather than one simply of decay. Patterns of association that have outlived their usefulness are falling away, making room for new forms of collaboration and cooperation. And the space thus created provides a valuable opportunity to explore social and economic arrangements that are suited to humanity's aspirations for the future and characterized only by that which is most beneficial from its past.

Global challenges will ultimately require global solutions. Addressing inequality, social fragmentation, and similar ills calls for a notable expansion of consciousness and identity. Also needed will be universal systems that cannot be undermined by picking and choosing between the current patchwork of independent national policies. In taking up this work, one area of ongoing learning must be how fiscal, wage, and social policies can be implemented in ways that recognize the capacity of all populations to contribute to the advancement of humanity. How can

global actors go about their work in ways that recognize around them a world filled with billions of protagonists of constructive change? How, in practical terms, will efforts under such a paradigm differ from those undertaken when the generality of humanity was seen primarily through the lens of deprivation and need?

Experience has shown that building societies of equality and inclusion will require stubborn obstacles to be confronted head-on. Formidable indeed are challenges such as the extreme concentration of wealth in the hands of a few; the culture of corruption that often afflicts the wealthy and the powerful but influences the daily choices of the masses as well; the long-standing forms of prejudice that are boldly reasserting themselves not only in the realm of discourse but also in the formulation of policy and law. Yet experience has also shown the ability of virtually any population to refashion society when inspired by a shared vision of the future and committed to a common course of action. These are dynamics that Member States, as well as UN agencies and civil society organizations can foster in very practical and specific ways - among them the policies being considered by the Commission this year. Let all of us, then, find our role in unlocking the vast potential of an increasingly united and purposeful humanity.